New roots for the uprooted

They came here from Laos, a southeast Asian country which after being ravaged during the Vietnam War became one of the world’s poorest locales. They are the Hmong and they are the second largest immigrant population in North Carolina, behind Hispanics.

They also now have a relationship with The Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T, whose specialists are working to help the limited-resource audience become more successful farmers. Addressing such key areas as sustainable agriculture, marketing, language, community resources and other challenges, Cooperative Extension is in partnership and working at the behest of the United Hmong Association.

Persecuted in their own country after the Vietnam War, during which thousands of Hmong (mung) fought against the communist North Vietnamese with the backing of the CIA, thousands of Hmong fled Laos for the United States as refugees. North Carolina has the fourth-largest settlement of Hmong, an estimated population of 15,000 that live mostly in Alexander, Burke, Caldwell and Catawba counties.

The Hmong have a farming history in their own country but since arriving here in the mid-1980s most have had little success in re-establishing themselves as farmers. Only 30 to 50 Hmong residents are estimated to be making money from farming, yet organizers are certain that many more want greater success.

Extension’s overall goal is to help the Hmongs build their skill set, and understand the value of niche products so they can then sell those products at fresh markets. The work is being funded through a three-year federal grant from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Dr. Michelle Eley, community development resource specialist for the Extension program, is the principal investigator or project manager for Cooperative Extension’s part of the project. She and Dr. Keith Baldwin, horticulture specialist, coordinate projects with the United Hmong Association. The advocacy group contacted A&T because of the University’s expertise in working with underserved and limited-resource populations.

Agents, directors and other staff based in the affected counties are also part of the project team, Eley says. County-based Extension experts have been featured along with Baldwin on Hmong radio offering agricultural information. Cooperative Extension also has a demonstration site on a Catawba County Hmong farm where experts teach residents about such niche products as peppers and watermelons, and host sessions on black plastic and drip irrigation.

The few Hmong farmers who have ventured into the market have been selling their produce at flea markets, where they aren’t getting the best price for their goods, Eley says. Because of the language and cultural barriers they face, not many Hmong farmers have taken advantage of farmers markets, but Cooperative Extension is working with farms market coordinators to circumvent barriers and involve the Hmongs.

“We want to make sure they understand the importance of growing niche products,” Eley says. “Hopefully, they’ll see the benefits of growing a diversity of products; especially products that customers want and are willing to pay a nice price for.”

Cooperative Extension is helping Draychyane Vang and other Hmong immigrants with production and marketing of such alternative crops as chayote, an Asian squash.

Dr. Mac’s Moment

First, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Donald McDowell and I’m the SAES interim dean. I came to A&T in 1981 and I’ve served as an instructor, assistant and associate professor, and professor. Since 2001, I’ve served as the SAES associate dean for Academic Programs.

I received my bachelor’s degree in agricultural economics from Southern University, Baton Rouge, La., and my master’s and doctoral degrees, also in agricultural economics, from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Now that you know who I am, let me get right to business. The SAES started this school year with a mission — to continue to make this school the best. Not the best of the nation’s 18, 1890 land-grant institutions. But the best, period.

As we move forward, we have a Strategic Plan that we will continue to tweak and follow. We are closely examining UNC Tomorrow and the Farm Bill to see how we might augment the work we are already doing, particularly in our Cooperative Extension and Agricultural Research programs, to meet the needs of the state’s citizens. We are also refining our recruitment and retention efforts to assure that we will be able to supply the state and country with students prepared for today’s agriculture. Additionally, we are working to assure that our existing students are challenged, supported and on track for graduation.

Shortly, you will receive the latest copy of our research magazine, called Research. In this publication you will read about the efforts of our researchers to help our rural citizens improve their way of life. We aren’t new to assisting our state’s citizens, this is our mission and it’s work we take pride in doing.

My role as dean may be interim, but there isn’t anything temporary about our forward movement.

— Dr. Donald McDowell, Interim Dean, School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences
Agricultural Research Program’s associate dean putting finishing touches on a distinguished career

Dr. Carolyn Turner, associate dean for research for the SAES and a nationally recognized authority on food safety and energy efficiency in housing, has announced her plans to retire in December, after a career spanning more than 40 years.

Turner’s contributions to the school, to the University, to the state and nation — not to mention to the field of family and consumer sciences — are far too numerous to mention in this short space, but a few highlights illustrate a distinguished career of service to research, education and outreach at the local, state and national levels.

Following several years working for the Greensboro Housing Authority, Turner’s tenure at N.C. A&T began in 1973, and was only interrupted while pursuing a Ph.D. from Virginia Tech. Over the years, she maintained an active research program, which concentrated on energy efficiency in residential housing. She served on dozens of research projects, either as principal or co-principal investigator, which attracted more than $11 million to the University. Her publications and presentations over the years have contributed to many energy conservation improvements in manufactured housing that today save consumers untold amounts of money while reducing untold tons of pollution. Turner is also co-author of numerous editions of the textbook Housing Decisions that continues to be used in high schools.

Through the decades, industry and government groups have continued to rely on Turner’s advice and expertise. Among her numerous appointments, she has served as president of the National Housing Group, the trade organization for the housing industry, and also chaired the public advisory panel of Duke Energy Company. Locally, she has served on the Greensboro Housing Coalition and the Guilford County Environmental Review Board, which she now chairs. Since 1994, the governor of North Carolina has repeatedly tapped Turner for the board of directors of the Advanced Energy Corporation, which she has chaired and on which she continues to serve. She was also repeatedly appointed by the United States Secretary of Energy to serve on the National Energy Advisory Board from 1999 to 2005. In 2005, she was appointed to serve within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security as a member of the executive advisory board to the National Food Defense and Protection Center.

Under Turner’s leadership, the Agricultural Research Program has flourished, reaching record-level funding last year of $12.3 million. One of her first initiatives after becoming associate dean for research in 2001 was to ensure retention of top-notch researchers by organizing a tenure-track program. She also organized the research program into six program areas and assisted in revamping the management of the University Farm, where much of the school’s agricultural research takes place. Turner also helped bring national attention to A&T’s Agricultural Research Program by initiating the annual report, Research.

One of her crowning achievements is her successful marshaling of the new Center of Excellence in Post-Harvest Technologies at the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis, which will officially open this month. The center will collaborate with other university partners to improve food safety and nutrition for the benefit of consumers and the state’s agriculture industry.

“Carolyn’s career will have a lasting impact,” said Dr. Alton Thompson, interim provost of A&T and former SAES dean. “The school, the University, the Agricultural Research Program and the field of family and consumer sciences are all better off today, thanks to her dedication and leadership. As a respected colleague, a consummate professional, and a dear friend, she will be deeply missed by me and by everyone in the SAES.”

In the 1980s, Turner was instrumental in securing funding that converted the Garrett House on the A&T campus into a lab for studies of energy consumption in residential housing.
Dr. T gets Hall of Fame Induction

Dr. Alton Thompson, the interim provost of N.C. A&T State University, whose regular duties are presiding as the dean of the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, is being inducted into the CSREES Hall of Fame.

Thompson is lauded for helping Cooperative States Research, Education, and Extension Service fulfill its mission of advancing agriculture, the environment, communities, and human health and well being.

Thompson's induction into the Hall of Fame will be made Oct. 21 in Washington, during CSREES's annual awards ceremony. Thompson is expected to discuss the role CSREES has had in advancing agricultural research and education at A&T, and will also talk about the impact CSREES has had on his own career.

Established in 2004, the CSREES Hall of Fame recognizes individuals who have worked, coordinated, or supported activities exemplifying CSREES's synergy of excellence in any combination of research, education, and Extension approaches on local, regional, national, or international levels, and have demonstrated a measurable and positive impact on the agency.

"To join such distinguished company is an accolade on its own, but to be inducted during the early stages of this award is even more of an accomplishment," Thompson said. "I am humbled and honored."

Thompson led the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences from July 2000 to July 2008, when he became interim provost of A&T.

He is committed to helping A&T realize its vision as a learner-centered community that develops and preserves intellectual capital through learning, discovery, engagement and operational excellence. As dean of the SAES, his energies have been focused on raising the School's academic and administrative performance to the next level.

His collaborative and energetic leadership style helped advance the School's student enrollment, public and private financial support, and service to local, national and international communities.

Thompson's academic specialty is in the interface of statistics, research methods, demography and rural sociology. His research has resulted in the publication of 25 articles in refereed journals, seven book chapters, and a book titled Quality of Life Among Rural Residents in North Carolina: Community and Life Satisfaction.

Thompson is a member of the American Agricultural Economics Association, the Rural Sociological Society and the Southern Rural Sociological Association.

A native of Chocowinity, Thompson earned a Ph.D. in rural sociology from The Ohio State University.

Dr. Valerie L. Giddings has assumed responsibility as chair of the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences. Giddings has over 25 years of teaching and administrative experience in higher education. She comes to the SAES from Winston-Salem State University, where her administrative experience included the position of associate vice chancellor for lifelong learning with responsibility for distance learning, evening and weekend programs, summer school and continuing education.

Dr. Giddings received her doctorate and master's degrees from Virginia Tech in Clothing and Textiles and her bachelor's degree from Bennett College in Home Economics. She is the author of a number of research articles and presentations on topics related to distance learning, the cultural aspects of functional and aesthetic design, African American dress and adornment, professional dress, diversity in higher education and academic program assessment. Awards and recognitions she has been presented include the Outstanding Alumni Award from the Department of Clothing and Textiles at Virginia Tech.

Dr. Niki Whitley has recently joined the SAES, with Extension and Research appointments. Whitley comes to the SAES from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, where she was an associate professor and Extension specialist dealing with livestock.

Whitley received her bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Georgia, and her Ph.D. from Mississippi State University. She also completed post-doctoral work at the University of Missouri. Whitley has 16 author and co-author peer-reviewed manuscripts and 33 abstracts on her publications list. She has had over $1.6 million in grant funding and has conducted numerous Extension workshops and presentations. Whitley will be working with sustainable pastured livestock production, including pastured pork production.

Turner is pictured with David H. Murdock, the owner of Dole Foods and visionary behind the N.C. Research Campus, a research complex that now includes the Center for Excellence in Post-Harvest Technologies. A grand finale for Turner's career has been her work to establish the Center, a landmark expansion of the Agricultural Research Program’s resources.
Draychyane Vang in a field of lemon grass — an Asian herb with niche market potential for small-scale agriculture in North Carolina. A&T’s Cooperative Extension specialists, who have been working with the Hmong population in the western Piedmont, will also be sharing their research-based guidance on alternative crops for small farms and niche markets during Small Farms Week 2009, March 22–26. Nov. 21 is the deadline for nominations for the 2009 Gilmer L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmer of the Year Award. Nomination forms are online at www.ag.ncat.edu.